

Maps show – and hide – key information about Ukraine war | The Conversation

By Timothy Barney

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“All maps are lies,” my colleague, geographer David Salisbury, says.

He’s right. All maps are inherently incomplete, focusing on certain subjects and areas to the exclusion of others. These are crucial aspects of rhetoric, the field I study. Every map distorts the world, whether it’s of a local area or the whole Earth. No map can do otherwise, except a map exactly as large as the territory it depicts – though as the author Jorge Luis Borges famously pointed out, that map would be useless.

But maps’ lies can be productive. Maps can simplify the world and make it more easily comprehensible.

Geographers often speak in terms of what they call the “silences” of maps – what’s missing and unseen, hidden in the margins. Those silences are just as meaningful as what’s on the page. It’s important to ask what has been left out.

That’s certainly true when looking at maps depicting aspects of Russia’s war on Ukraine. News organizations around the world have published many maps of the crisis, but their standard views are not the only way maps can help people understand what is happening in Ukraine.

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